

PART FOUR

SYSTEMATIC STUDIES

CHAPTER EIGHT

ORTHODOXY, HISTORY AND THEOLOGY: RECONTEXTUALISATION AND ITS DESCRIPTIVE AND PROGRAMMATIC FEATURES

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this contribution I would like to introduce one of the leading concepts of the interdisciplinary research we have conducted in the past few years concerning the nature and determination of theological truth: “recontextualisation”.¹ In fact, this concept stands for a contemporary systematic-theological approach that intrinsically relates theological truth to context and history. As a concept and an approach, recontextualisation not only reflects the outcome of a theological learning process (which itself can be analysed as a process of recontextualisation), but also qualifies the viewpoint from which systematic theologians may engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue concerning theological truth and history. As will become clear, recontextualisation serves first as a reading key to understand the way in which theological truth has been established; i.e., to describe its history from a theological perspective. At the same time, this approach constitutes the normative framework from which any contemporary and future establishing of such truth is perceived. Proceeding thus, it structures the attempts of systematic theologians to reach at what is theologically true today and tomorrow.

¹ It concerns the GOA-project: “Orthodoxy: Process and Product”, sponsored by the K.U. Leuven Research Fund. In this interdisciplinary research project, Church historians and systematic theologians joined forces in order to investigate the nature of theological truth and the way in which theological truth is determined in Church and theology. An earlier version of the current text has appeared in the collection presenting some major research results of the project: L. Boeve, “Systematic Theology, Truth and History: Recontextualisation,” in *Orthodoxy: Process and Product* (eds. M. Lamberigts, L. Boeve and T. Merrigan; BETL, 227; Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 27–44.

We will elaborate on this conceptualisation in three parts. First, we will illustrate how history and context became important in modern theological models to think the constitutive historical embeddedness of Christian identity and the development of tradition. Afterwards, we will shed light more closely on the category of recontextualisation, and the way it radicalises modern theological intuitions. Finally, we will argue that the concept of “recontextualisation” is itself to be considered as the outcome of a postmodern “recontextualisation” of modern correlation theologies, and the way they relate to the current context. In this third part, as well as in the conclusion of this contribution, it will become clear how, from such a contemporary attempt at recontextualisation, questions about the particularity of Christian truth claims arise, inviting us to reconsider the relation between theological truth, history and narrativity.

2. THEOLOGICAL TRUTH AND HISTORY

As a paradigm to theologically think (and read) the development of tradition, recontextualisation is concerned with theological epistemology, and therefore a specific understanding of (our reaching at) theological truth. More specifically, in contradistinction to ahistorical or cumulative models, which attempt to think through the relation between theological truth and tradition development; recontextualisation starts from the firm presumption that history is co-constitutive for theological truth. Although truth is never reducible to time, neither is truth established or accessible outside of time. Whereas ahistorical models of tradition development accentuate the timelessness of truth and the asymmetry between the orders of the eternal and the temporal, the model of recontextualisation starts from the intrinsic bond between both, without, however, reducing the one to the other. In this regard, the nineteenth-century cumulative models of tradition development, which resulted from the attempts to incorporate the increasing modern awareness of the historicity of truth, still hold to the presumption of incommensurability between truth and time.² If history plays a role in the unfolding of theological truth, then, according to such cumu-

² For these paragraphs, see also L. Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 30; Leuven: Peeters; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), chapter 1. See also G. Soll, “Dogma

lative models, this role is to be conceived of as external and extrinsic, a mere occasion for further elucidation and explication of what is in principle, be it often implicitly, known from the very beginning. Disruptive events, ideas, or others, all challenging Christian tradition, instigate the further unfolding of the tradition, without a real impact on the truth that is expressed. The truth is already available and has only to be unearthed and unravelled, or to be specified and applied to new circumstances and questions. In such a model, theology as a discipline stands in the service of such unfolding, explicating and applying Christian truth.

Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, inspired by developments in philosophical hermeneutics and epistemology, a shift occurred from a cumulative understanding of tradition to models in which truth and history progressively became intrinsically connected. As already mentioned, such a shift has far-reaching consequences, not only for one's perspective on the history of Christianity and Christian theology, but also for the way theology perceives of its tasks today. The awareness of the historicity and contextuality as regards the "process" of coming to theological truth becomes a distinctive feature of this truth itself. Indeed, in their methodological considerations, many modern theologians have pointed to the importance of culture and society, or more broadly, of the prevailing context, for a present understanding of faith, and, more specifically, for whatever current assignment theology is commissioned with. The awareness grew (a) that Christian sources and theologians have attempted from the very beginning to understand and have expressed the Christian faith in relation to the context in which this faith was lived and practised, (b) that interpreting these attempts can only legitimately succeed when one takes this past context (and one's own context) into account, and (c) that the current task for theology consists precisely in relating ("correlating") the Christian faith anew to the contemporary context—the latter often on the basis of diagnosing the gap between the inherited tradition and a contextual newness which challenges this tradition. Of course, early on most theologians were conscious of the fact that theological truth was realised in history, and received its expression in human language and thought. What changed, however, was the consciousness of the

und Dogmenentwicklung," in *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (eds. M. Schmaus a.o.; Freiburg, Basel, and Vienna: Herder, 1971), vol. I.5, 189–196.

fact that the changes, which history, language and thought underwent also affect an understanding of faith and the truth conveyed in it. History is not only the framework in which truth is expressed, but is, from an epistemological viewpoint, co-constitutive of this truth.

In the 1980s, two prominent catholic theologians, Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng, suggested models of tradition-development that demonstrate this awareness. Leaning heavily upon the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Schillebeeckx conceives of the development of tradition in terms of consecutive fusions of horizons of understanding, consequently distinguishing different periods within the history of the Christian understanding of faith, each with their own horizon of understanding.³ For Schillebeeckx, the identity of the Christian faith is not to be conceived of as having a kind of fixed core that is handed down from period to period, but rather as having one that lies in the different successive relationships between faith-understanding and the horizon of meaning. Because of the historical shifts of horizons of meaning, this relationship between faith-understanding and the context continually needs to be reproduced in accordance with the prevailing horizon of meaning. The dialectics between (new) experiences (in new contexts) and (old) interpretations (arising from older contexts) fosters a continuous process of the development of tradition in which ruptures do not threaten the continuity of tradition, but may be forced precisely to guarantee this continuity. The relationship between Jesus' message and his historical context is fundamentally similar to the relation between the New Testament message and the historical context that gave it form. Despite the difference between both faith expressions, there is identity and continuity—or "proportional similarity". This identity of meaning continues to persist through the subsequent proportions established between faith expression and context, applicable throughout patristic, medieval and modern times. But Schillebeeckx' real message is that this relation should also, once again, acquire a new form today.⁴

The identity of the Christian tradition then, including its theological truth, is what the consecutive phases of tradition, in relation to

³ See E. Schillebeeckx, *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1989). English translation: E. Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, transl. by J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1990), in reference to H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960).

⁴ For the following figure, see Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 42.

their specific contexts, have in common: the proportional similarity between them. Each expression of what the Christian faith is about is necessarily time-bound and contextual—and, of course, this holds true to the same degree for all current attempts to express Christian identity and to formulate theological truth. In the words of Schillebeeckx: the *interpretandum* of Christian faith can only be expressed in time-bound *interpretaments*. As regards the process of the fusion of horizons, i.e., the transition from one horizon to the other, Schillebeeckx points to the interwovenness of experience and interpretation. Meaningful experiences do not occur unmediated but feature within interpretative frameworks. Experience, however, cannot be reduced solely to interpretation. Although never without or independent from interpretative frameworks, experience can put pressure on these frameworks. Experiences of newness confront the limits of existing interpretative frameworks and may provoke shifts within them, changing these frameworks, which are themselves the result of earlier interactions between experience and interpretation. Therefore, for Schillebeeckx, the identity of Christian faith can never be defined outside or beyond the historical manner in which it reveals itself, and is subsequently expressed.

Hans Küng, for his part, applies Thomas Kuhn's views on paradigm change in the natural sciences to distinguish various paradigms in the theological tradition.⁵ By so doing, Küng does not simply wish to present theology with a descriptive tool for reading the past; such a theological model of paradigm change serves him primarily as a convincing argument in the plea for a new paradigm shift in contemporary theology. Consequently, he draws the contours of what he calls a "postmodern ecumenical theological paradigm", to be realised today (which in his case was the late eighties and the beginning of the nineties

⁵ Cf. *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future* (eds. H. Küng and D. Tracy; Edinburgh: Clark, 1989), with reference to T.S. Kuhn, *Die Struktur wissenschaftlicher Revolutionen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967). Küng included a revised version of his texts from these proceedings in a monograph: H. Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch: Eine ökumenische Grundlegung* (München/Zürich: Piper, 1987). English translation: H. Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, transl. by P. Heinegg (New York: Anchor, 1990). From the same perspective, he also published: H. Küng, *Große christliche Denker* (München/Zürich: Piper, 1994), and H. Küng, *Das Christentum: Wesen und Geschichte* (München/Zürich: Piper, 1994). English translation: H. Küng, *Great Christian Thinkers*, transl. by J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1994), and H. Küng, *Christianity: Its Essence and History*, transl. by J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1995).

of the last century). From the perspective of this model of scientific development, reality is never perceived with a naked eye, but always through paradigmatic glasses. Paradigms, including theological paradigms, constitute “an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community”. A paradigm thus concerns a certain manner of working, looking, and judging, and is considered as fundamentally historical. As in the natural sciences, the standard condition for theology is one of “normal science”, a given and globally unquestioned way of doing theology, characterised by standard books and authors, thinking patterns and examples. New knowledge adds to the knowledge already acquired in the current paradigm. When crises occur, they are first dealt with from within the existing paradigm, often revealing its limits and contradictions, challenging and questioning it. Shifts in the context may therefore cause crises in the existing paradigm, leading to an eventual change of paradigms. Such a paradigm change then is not an organic shift from one paradigm to another; rather it implies a revolution, drastically pushing changes in vocabulary, thinking patterns, etc. One does not just change paradigms but really “converts” from one paradigm to the other. To a far-reaching extent, not only scientific discoveries, but also historical-contingent incidents and contextual conditions play a role in such shifts. The new paradigm is installed when it succeeds in providing the standards for a new era of “normal science”; i.e., when the majority of scholars accept the paradigm and adepts of the older paradigm become marginalised. Moreover, once one has moved into the new paradigm, it is hard even to imagine what working under the conditions of the older paradigm would have meant. However, Küng adds, a theological paradigm change, as in the sciences also, never involves complete discontinuity, but moves in the space between continuity and discontinuity, evolution and revolution, stability and change.⁶

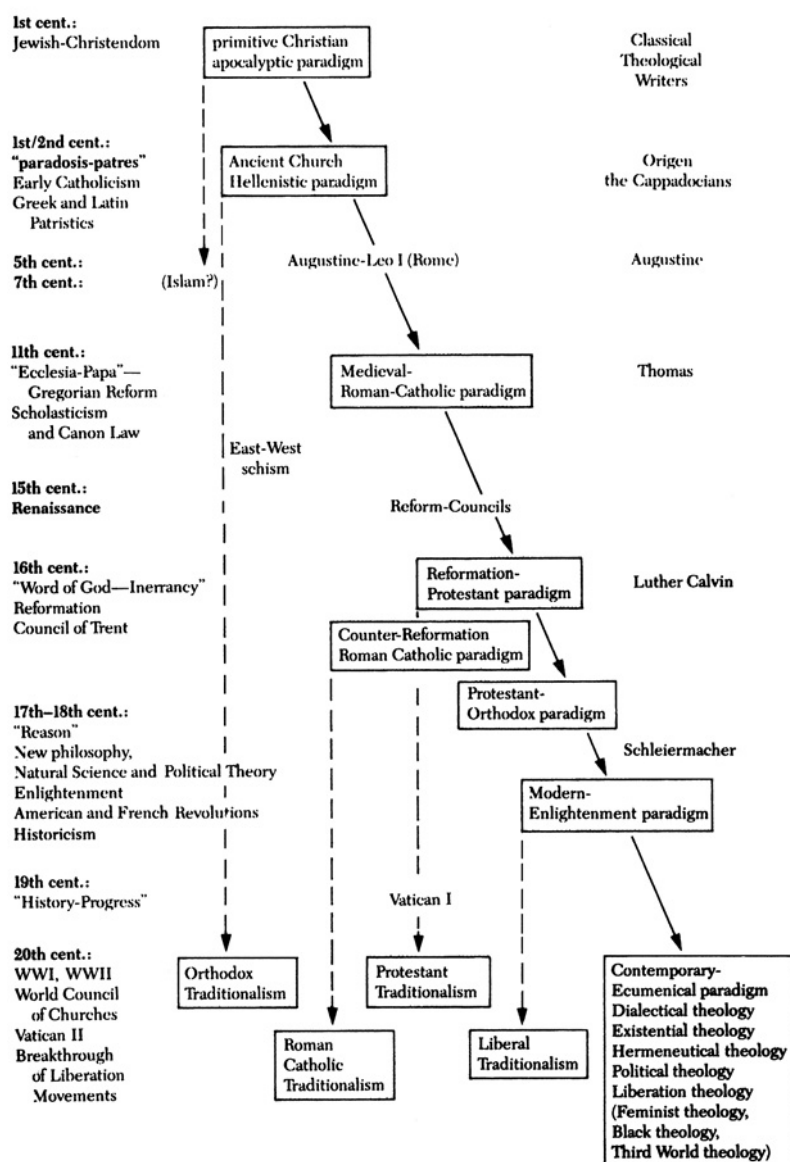
In the case of both Schillebeeckx and Küng, these methodological reflections have led them to redefine correlation theology in terms of the critical correlation or interrelation between Christian faith and the modern context.⁷ The task for a contemporary theology then is to seek

⁶ For the following figure, see Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, 128.

⁷ Cf. Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, 200–207, 237–249, 268–269. For Schillebeeckx, see the first part of Schillebeeckx, *Church*, as well as A. Depoorter, “Correlatie onder

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out those contemporary experiences and developments that may offer clues toward reconsidering Christian faith in a plausible and relevant way, instigating a new fusion of horizons between the inherited tradition and the contemporary context and respectively forcing a shift towards a new postmodern, ecumenical theological paradigm.

3. RECONTEXTUALISATION

Schillebeeckx' and Küng's views on the development of tradition in terms of the consecutive fusions of horizons and paradigm shifts emphasise the intrinsic historical-contextual character of all attempts to express and understand what Christian faith is about, in the past as well as in the present. Both in its pursuit of understanding how Christian tradition has developed through the ages, and in conceiving of how contemporary theology should relate to the challenges of the current context, the concept of *recontextualisation* radicalises this intuition.⁸ On closer inspection, the approach of Schillebeeckx, as well as that of Küng, exhibits problems with the discontinuity between different horizons or paradigms present in their philosophical sources, respectively in Gadamer and Kuhn. Although both theologians make ample use of their resources to elaborate on their models for the development of tradition and theological epistemology, at the same time they are hesitant to overstress the possible rupture between horizons or paradigms. Both suffer from what Küng stated to be typical for a ruling paradigm, i.e., stressing the continuity with the past, underplaying its discontinuous newness in order to obtain more historical plausibility and theological legitimacy. However, in so doing, the radical hermeneutical character of the intuition that there is an intrinsic link between theological truth, on the one hand, and history, language and context, on the other, is obfuscated. In one way or another, both of them continue to uphold an identifiable kernel, which is then expressed in the diversity of historical contexts. For Schillebeeckx, this

vuur? Bedenkingen bij de theologische methode van Paul Tillich en Edward Schillebeeckx," *Bijdragen* 66 (2005): 37–64.

⁸ See Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*. Furthermore, at other instances, I critically engaged the modern-hermeneutical position (as well as its anti-modern counterpart); see, e.g., L. Boeve, "Beyond the Modern and Anti-modern Dilemma: Gaudium et Spes and Theological Method in a Postmodern European Context," *Horizons* 34 (2007): 292–305.

becomes apparent when one looks more carefully at the epistemological features of his concept of experience. Schillebeeckx distinguishes at the heart of the experience (e.g., the faith experience, the contrast experience) a kernel with universal significance, a kind of direction of interpretation, which cannot be reduced to the interpretation frameworks.⁹ There remains a substance of faith, which, although not available in itself, is the same in all horizons. It is only fair to note that Schillebeeckx is nevertheless vigilant and tries to avoid to substantiate this historical identity of the Christian tradition.¹⁰

Hans Küng, on the other hand, is less consequent and links this kernel—he speaks of “the centre of all theology”—to the historical Jesus, resulting from the historical-critical engagement of exegesis with the Scriptures, as though this engagement is not contextual, value-laden and would escape the paradigmatic lens which Küng sees present in all theology. Through identifying and determining the centre of all theology, Küng clearly has taken the sting out of Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shift. What paradigms have in common, according to Kuhn, is not something substantial, but a formal resemblance: the contextually anchored ability to understand and describe reality with a claim to truth.

From the perspective of recontextualisation, which radicalises the modern theological intuition, that there is an intrinsic link between theological truth and history, one can quite easily lay one’s finger on the reticence displayed in Küng, and to a lesser degree in Schillebeeckx. In this regard, also their theology takes up challenges from their own, i.e., modern contexts, turning their model of tradition development

⁹ For more information on Schillebeeckx and the role of religious experience in his theology, see L. Boeve, “Experience according to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology,” in *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricoeur* (eds. L. Boeve and L.P. Hemming; Studies in Philosophical Theology 23; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 199–225, and L. Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York/London: Continuum, 2007), chapter 4.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 42–45. Moreover Schillebeeckx remains very conscious of the discontinuity which the development of tradition entails: “Also thanks to shifts and ruptures in the doctrinal formulas, the dogma remains true”. E. Schillebeeckx, “Breuken in christelijke dogma’s,” in *Breuklijnen: Grenservaringen en zoektochten* (ed. T. Schoof; Baarn: Nelissen, 1994), 15–49, “A historical rupture with past cultural forms of faith perhaps may then be the only possible way to reach a contemporary doctrinal reformulation which is faithful to the gospel and the Christian faith tradition... The each time new present enters the re-determination of the past” (26; my translation).

in a particularly modern model. Before illustrating this point further, I will now first try to define recontextualisation as a leading category for contemporary theology, both from a descriptive and a normative perspective.

As a theological category, recontextualisation implies that Christian faith and tradition are not only contained in a specific historico-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political context, but are also co-constituted by this context. To be sure, faith cannot be reduced to history and context, nor can the development of tradition be described as a mere adaptation to both of them. Nevertheless, there is an intrinsic bond between faith and tradition, on the one hand, and history and context, on the other. Hence, contextual novelty puts pressure on historically conditioned expressions of faith and their theological understanding, and drives towards a recontextualisation. Contextual sensitivities and thought patterns start shifting; older forms of tradition lose their familiarity and plausibility; and effects of alienation often arise. Believing and theological communities find themselves in the middle of a search for a new relationship between the transmitted faith tradition and the changing contemporary context. By both taking part in and confronting itself with this changed context, these communities establish ways to express the Christian faith, attempting to be faithful to the tradition while also relating adequately to the context in which the latter is situated—thus, enacting a balance between continuity and discontinuity.

The concept of recontextualisation, therefore, functions both descriptively and normatively. (a) As a *descriptive* category, it is a tool to analyse the ways in which tradition has been challenged by contextual change and novelty. Historically speaking then, reactions have varied from stubborn condemnation and suppression of this novelty, as an attempt to uphold the tradition uncontaminated, to the uncritical embracing of and adaptation to cultural newness at the risk of watering down the tradition's specificity (though the evaluation of both these extremes would already lead us to the normative use of the term). The consistent attempts to resist any cultural influence, e.g., because culture is considered to be inimical to Christian faith, are themselves in fact to be described as recontextualisations. Because the context has changed, so also the relation of a seemingly unaltered tradition to this context has changed. The result of an earlier recontextualisation with the previous context, then, is profiled over against the new context, claiming for it a pureness it never possessed. Moreover, attempts to

protect tradition against context, most often use strategies provided by the context itself. The insistence on the medical inexplicability of the miracles at Lourdes, involving medical specialists within commissions to attest to their reliability, is one of numerous examples.¹¹

(b) As a *normative* category, recontextualisation calls for a theological programme in which the insight into the intrinsic link between faith and context inspires theologians to take the contextual challenges seriously in order to come to a contemporary theological discourse, which at the same time can claim theological validity and contextual plausibility.¹² This involves a critical constructive engagement with the new context. We will elaborate on this in what follows.

A good example of both functions of the category of recontextualisation are to be found in the Old Testament, when the Jewish religion was challenged by Hellenism, and evolved from a Judaeo-Aramaic to a Judaeo-Hellenistic context. According to Jacques Vermeulen, the reception of Hellenistic culture in a number of the earlier books of the Old Testament, displays at least four different models of relating to the context—in our terminology, and from within a descriptive perspective: four different ways of recontextualisation.¹³ While Qoheleth may have assimilated Hellenism, this is certainly not the case with Jesus ben Sirach: Greek culture is dangerous and to be rejected—only the strict maintenance of the Law offers any future. The book of Daniel also shares this critical stance, but is more radical: Hellenism is the incarnation of Evil itself. A product of the Jewish community of Alexandria, the book of Wisdom, on the other hand, offers a good example of the integration of Jewish faith and Hellenistic culture: Greek culture is employed as an instrument in the service of faith to YHWH. Whereas the first way of answering the challenge of Hellenism would seem to equal “assimilation to the new context”, the second way and

¹¹ Already in 1859, a professor of the Faculty of Medicine at Montpellier was asked to examine some of the cures, which occurred after the apparitions. For the historical developments and current procedures, cf. <http://www.lourdes-france.org> (Cures and miracles).

¹² As a normative theological category, recontextualization can be theologically motivated from a renewed understanding of the doctrine of incarnation, as I have tried to show in: L. Boeve, “Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology,” in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (eds. T. Merrigan and J. Haers; BETL, 152; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 577–593.

¹³ Cf. J. Vermeulen, “Foi traditionnelle et culture nouvelle: un précédent biblique,” in *Cultures et théologies en Europe: Jalons pour un dialogue* (ed. J. Vermeulen; Paris: Cerf, 1995), 13–42. For this example, see also Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 26–28.

the third way stand for a form of “conservative resistance” against the new culture in order to defend traditional values and even for a “diabolisation” of the new culture. The fourth way, finally, exhibits a critical-productive encounter of faith-tradition and context. According to Vermeylen, all four books constitute a witness to the internal plurality of responses within Judaism to the challenge formed by Hellenism, and the fact that they were (in part) officially canonised, sanctions this plurality. Nevertheless, from a Christian theological view, Vermeylen adds, the New Testament and patristic writings reveal that the various responses are not all of equal value. For the option of the young Church was analogous to that of the book of Wisdom. Ultimately, this choice for Greek culture became so deeply rooted in the Christian tradition that many, even up to the present day, consider it to be irreplaceably and inseparably bound up with the Christian faith.¹⁴ The underlying metaphysics and anthropology of Hellenistic culture, however, are no longer those of today, Vermeylen remarks; and in conclusion he subsequently asks the clearly rhetorical question: “Can Christianity be faithfully expressed in categories which are no longer borrowed from inherited Greek concepts, but which introduce a multiplicity of contemporary cultural sensitivities?”¹⁵

As “faith seeking understanding”, theology has been challenged by other forms of reflexivity throughout history, and their respective theological, cosmological and anthropological views. More specifically, philosophy and developments in philosophy—and more recently, the (human) sciences—have had a major impact on theology, and the way it has attempted to grasp intellectually God’s revelatory and salvific involvement in creation and human history. Inasmuch as philosophy offered a reflexive account of contemporary contextual worldviews and sensitivities, and sometimes gave rise to changes in these worldviews and sensibilities as well, it contributed significantly to the intellectual horizon in which theologians sought to express an understanding of Christian faith. On many accounts, it is clear that the involvement of theology with contemporary philosophy has led to new ways of doing

¹⁴ Cf., for example, J. Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum. Vorlesungen über das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis* (München: Kösel, 1968), 51, stating the specific, irreducible “right” of Greek thinking for Christianity; the providential nature of the “marriage” between Judeo-Christian faith and Greek-Hellenistic reflection, normative for any future development and hermeneutics of tradition. See also J. Ratzinger, “The Changeable and Unchangeable in Theology,” *Theological Digest* 10 (1962): 71–76 (73).

¹⁵ Vermeylen, “Foi traditionnelle et culture nouvelle,” 42.

theology.¹⁶ Theologians have borrowed models, patterns, ideas and terminology from philosophy (human sciences) in order to develop, structure, support or flesh out their own understanding of what constitutes Christian faith. To the extent that theologians shared in these contextual sensitivities, they were often conversant with (one of) the prevailing philosophical positions.¹⁷ They used thinking patterns, categories, etc., from philosophy in order to express reflexively the truth of faith, which—by its own nature—is never absolutely grasped or completely understood, and to signify it in a both theologically and contextually plausible and relevant way. By so doing, theologians did not as such become philosophers among the philosophers (or human scientists among human scientists), but in the best tradition of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*, used philosophy to engage anew the specific claims of their theological tradition. In short: confronted with new philosophical ideas and thought patterns, theology has been pressed to recontextualise itself. Such recontextualisation could imply—in Küng's words—a shift in theological paradigm. As new models put aside the older and existing ones, this has often caused—as the history of theology amply shows—discussion, conflict, and even condemnation. In any case, contextual newness induces the learning processes through which the Christian community, and its theologians, have searched for authentic ways to relate to it. Identity and rupture, here, go hand-in-hand.¹⁸ Theology therefore only exists as contextual theology, and the development of tradition as the ongoing process of recontextualisation. The present question of the theological recontextualisation of the Christian tradition into diverse cultural contexts (read: those different

¹⁶ The prime example, of course, is the way in which the rediscovery of Aristotelianism has influenced scholastic theology, illustrated at its best by the new synthesis performed by Thomas Aquinas, between Augustinian tradition and Aristotelian thought patterns and vocabulary—cf., e.g., to O.H. Pesch, *Thomas von Aquin. Grenze und Größe mittelalterlicher Theologie: Ein Einführung* (2nd ed.; Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1988, 1989).

¹⁷ See, e.g., D. Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: D. Knox, 1985); C. Stead, *Philosophie und Theologie. I. Die Zeit der Alten Kirche* (Kohlhammer Theologische Wissenschaft 14.4; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990).

¹⁸ On the one hand, faith communities remain faithful to their original inspiration and they continue the same Christian narrative precisely by giving a renewed expression to this inspiration in the changed context. On the other hand, they can hardly imagine themselves to have lived and believed within the framework of the older form of tradition—even if many of its elements, viz. images, symbols, rituals, narratives, articulations, concepts, are taken up in the new form, and, moreover, the older form of tradition is still kept by some of their contemporaries.

from the European context) is but a synchronic translation of what has already been occurring diachronically for a long time. Today, due to shifts in the European context, it would seem that European theology more than ever is in need of recontextualisation, starting with an increasing awareness of the contextuality of its own history and contemporary approaches.¹⁹

4. RECONTEXTUALISATION AS THE OUTCOME OF A POSTMODERN "RECONTEXTUALISATION" OF MODERN CORRELATION THEOLOGIES

This last remark, when taken seriously, takes recontextualisation, as a model to conceive of the development of tradition and of theological truth, one step further than Schillebeeckx, and certainly much further than Küng. It "recontextualises" the modern theological-methodological approaches in relation to the current context.

Schillebeeckx' as well as Küng's approach are, according to David Tracy's classification, in one way or another to be categorised as modern "correlationist theologies".²⁰ Within such theologies, the modern strivings for rationality, human freedom and social liberation have been considered privileged *loci theologici* from which to recontextualise the Christian faith in a God who is salvifically involved with human beings and their histories. Where human beings strove after human dignity, God could not be absent. Secular culture was no longer considered as alienated from Christianity, but rather the place where God was actively present in the struggle for both authentic subjectivity and social justice. Modern theologies thus presumed that there is a funda-

¹⁹ In order to better understand what theological recontextualization stands for, and to grasp the contemporary challenges of philosophy for theology, we have elaborated on Richard Schaeffler's noteworthy study, R. Schaeffler, *Religion und kritisches Bewußtsein* (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1973), in L. Boeve, "Theology, Recontextualisation and Contemporary Critical Consciousness: Lessons from Richard Schaeffler for a Postmodern Theological Epistemology," in *Théologie et Philosophie (FS E. Brito)* (ed. E. Gaziaux; BETL 206; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 455–483. There I argue that Schaeffler not only succeeds—on the descriptive level—in making the continual process of theological recontextualization due to contextual shifts more insightful, but also provides—on the normative level—a theological legitimation for recontextualization as a theological method. Moreover, from a discussion with Schaeffler, the shape of contemporary critical consciousness, and thus also the direction of the recontextualization urged by the current context, may become clearer.

²⁰ Cf. D. Tracy, "The Uneasy Alliance Reconciled: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 548–570.

mental continuity between modernity, with its striving for rationality and emancipation, and Christian faith. What was at stake then, was to critically (cor)relate the salvific message of Christian faith with the modern context. Correlation theologies, therefore, sought a consensus—a joint venture as it were—between culture and faith: the Christian was at least as modern as the average modern human being, and Christian faith even offered a surplus at the point where modernity reached its limits (e.g., eschatologically correcting mere inner-worldly utopian expectations). The modern project was an endeavour in which Christians could participate, together with all other “people of good will”—and this on theological grounds.²¹

It is in the framework of such approaches that the models for the development of tradition by Schillebeeckx and Küng were conceived in order to be able to account for the considerable changes which theology underwent throughout its dialogue with modernity. In Western Europe, however, the ambitious project of modern theology was carried out in a context marked by a still-existing factual overlap between context and Christian faith, which contextually supported its epistemological presumption of continuity. There remained a common cultural horizon, very much influenced by the Christian tradition. In the last decades, however, through the process of *detraditionalisation*, this common Christian horizon has more or less vanished. Though the majority of people are often still nominally Christian, the widespread familiarity with Christian discourses and practices has disappeared. In reality, the Christian tradition is no longer a quasi-unquestioned handing-over from one generation to another. Christians have become a minority within a pluralising society. The second distinguishing feature of the current European religious context is indeed its *pluralisation*, both from an intra- and interreligious perspective. The consciousness of this pluralisation is also, and more specifically, the result of physical and mental migration (communication media), of contacts

²¹ Because of the presumption of continuity, insofar as secular reason reaches truth, Christian faith cannot but comply with it. *Faith thus adds to, or qualifies, what human beings know by secular reason alone; or faith makes visible and motivates what is already at work at the heart of the modern project.* It would appear that the discourse of ethics has been especially conceived as the bridge between the modern context and Christian faith, both testifying to the latter's lasting validity, plausibility and rationality, and communicating it in a universally acknowledgeable language, resulting from this very dialogue. For these paragraphs, see also Boeve, “Beyond the Modern and Anti-modern Dilemma”.

with other religious traditions and of growing interreligious contacts. Christianity has not been replaced by a secular culture, but a plurality of worldviews and religions have moved in to occupy the vacant space left as result of its diminishing impact.²²

At the same time, modern epistemological standards (universality, transparency, and communicability) have been critiqued by *postmodern thinking*. Since the 1980s, postmodern sensibilities have questioned some basic presumptions of modern secular culture, calling for more attention to heterogeneity and radical historicity. Having learned from the lessons of twentieth-century history, they have become suspicious of totalising frameworks (the so-called “master narratives”) and call attention to the limits, contextuality, particularity, and contingency of any construction of meaning. They give rise to thinking patterns that start from a sensitivity to otherness and difference, and remain aware of the pervasive danger of a hegemonic “closing of our ways” to deal with them.

The difficulties encountered by correlation(ist) theologies, in turn, inspired anti-modern theologians, and some postmodern theologians, to claim the discontinuity between faith and context. Inasmuch as the modern and postmodern contexts have become alienated, only a Christian faith that can profile its identity against the context, offering radical remedies for its inherent weaknesses, can claim theological legitimacy.²³ Against anti-modern and some postmodern theologies,

²² For a more extensive treatment of this, see L. Boeve “Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 99–122.

²³ One of the most known antimodern theologians is Joseph Ratzinger, who recently repeated his criticism of modernity in his evaluation of contemporary Europe—cf. J. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, transl. by B. McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2006), which is a modified English translation of *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs: Die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005). For a historical-systematic introduction to his thought in this regard, and an evaluation, see L. Boeve, “Europe in Crisis: A Question of Belief or Unbelief? Perspectives from the Vatican,” *Modern Theology* 23 (2007): 205–227. The Radical Orthodoxy movement of John Milbank illustrates the postmodern position claiming the discontinuity between faith and postmodern context: see, e.g., the introduction of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (eds. J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward; London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 1–20; see also J. Milbank, “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry* (ed. L.P. Hemming; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 33–45; J.K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). For my observations, see L. Boeve, “(Post)Modern Theology on Trial? Towards a Radical Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Particularity,” *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003): 240–254; and for the case of neo-augustinianism

I would argue that the intrinsic link between faith and theology, and history and context, should not be positively pronounced—hence a pronouncement of *no discontinuity*. Beyond modern correlation, however, I suggest that the way in which both are related should be reconsidered—hence, *no naïve presumption of continuity* either. What is more: it is precisely the dialogue with the postmodern context that offers a way out of this dilemma. For the current context, both culturally and as regards its critical consciousness, challenges Christian faith to a positive move towards a recontextualised theological method.

On the cultural level, detraditionalisation and pluralisation have sharpened, on the one hand, the consciousness of the particularity and narrativity of the Christian faith itself, and the truth claims expressed in it. On the other hand, the context of plurality has clearly revealed that the Christian faith is situated amongst a variety of other religions and ideologies, venturing on the basis of their own particularity equally serious but widely different truth claims. Christianity (in all its internal diversity) is a participant on the pluralistic field, with its own history, narrativity and profile. Moreover, concrete dialogues with the other (believer, religion, etc.) teach us that those elements that seem to be similar to us, often differ most from us.

The postmodern critical consciousness reinforces this culturally conveyed awareness. Like all narratives, Christianity tends to close itself off from the challenge of difference and otherness. It repeatedly threatens to become a hegemonic master narrative immediately excluding or including otherness. Only as a narrative that, grounded by its own narrativity, succeeds to bear witness to (and thus not to forget) the very otherness of the other, could it be prevented from turning into a master narrative. Such consciousness includes the awareness of one's own particularity and historicity. It questions claims to an observer's position that are too facile, as if one is not already implied from the very beginning in the dynamic interplay of particularities. The dialogue between Christianity and the context should no longer lead to an attempt at a rational universalisation of what is particularly Christian, but make this particularity all the more manifest. Otherness interrupts the lapse into a master narrative.

in general, see also L. Boeve, "Retrieving Augustine Today: Between Neo-Augustinianist Essentialism and Radical Hermeneutics?" in *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance against Modernity?* (eds. L. Boeve, M. Lamberigts and M. Wisse; BETL, 219; Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 1–17.

It is indeed the acknowledgement of the otherness of the other, which forecloses any easy appeal to continuity, consensus or harmony. There is no reconciliation to be found in a kind of (Christian) meta-discourse, appeasing the irresolvable, often conflicting plurality of religions and worldviews. With the absence of a foundational and legitimating meta-narrative, the other—in light of its otherness—constitutes the boundary to Christian particularity, a boundary that we cannot make our own, which constantly recedes from us and which we cannot overtake. There is always otherness (another option) revealing the limits of our own position, and escaping every attempt to overtake it. There is always something unforeseeable, ungraspable, unexpected and uncontrollable—something which remains always other and interrupts our narratives.

Theological recontextualisation, however, is not a mere adaptation to the context, a giving-in to a postmodern, critical consciousness on contextual grounds. A legitimate recontextualisation can only be achieved when there are *profound theological grounds* for it. Moreover, it is here that the dialogue with the contemporary context promises new possibilities to profile Christian faith in a plausible and relevant way. For it would seem that the other who challenges Christian faith is not as such an external other, but might well reveal itself from within Christian faith. From this dialogue the insight can be gained that, from within a Christian hermeneutics—read as *a particular narratively determined stance*—the encounter with irreducible otherness may be the place where traces of God become manifest. For has God not always been the Other of our narratives, especially when these narratives threatened to close?²⁴

5. CONCLUSION: ORTHODOXY AND THE PARTICULARITY OF CHRISTIAN TRUTH CLAIMS

It is at this point that the focus on the particularity of Christian truth claims is situated. Inasmuch as the model of recontextualisation lives up to its own premises and is closely related with the current postmod-

²⁴ This is the main argument of Boeve, *God interrupts History*. A theology which is interrupted by contextual newness and otherness, may become a theology of interruption when it learns to read such interruptions as *loci theologici*, places where God may reveal Godself in our times. Interruption then becomes a theological reading key.

ern context and its critical consciousness, it invites a deeper reflection on the relation between Christian truth claims, the particularity of its tradition, and its relation to other truth claims. At the same time it poses questions on the universality of this truth claim. As we have seen, this truth claim should be thought of not as limited or hindered by Christian particularity, but rather as being made possible by it in the first place. It is in this regard that a theological-epistemological reflection on the doctrine of the Incarnation may prove necessary.

In the philosophy of religion section of our contribution to this NOSTER-project²⁵ we therefore developed how, from a theological-epistemological perspective, religious truth cannot be thought of apart from, or without an irreducible link to, particularity and contingency. This results in important insights for both the current discussion on theological epistemology and the philosophy of religion. In both cases, we call upon the theological doctrine of the Incarnation. As the starting point of our reflection, we engaged the current situation of religious plurality and the way it challenges the truth claims of Christianity. In the context of interreligious communication, Christians are being called to respect both their own truth claims and the truth claims of others at one and the same time. Rooted in their own Christian background, they participate in a dialogue that need not necessarily lead to greater unity—conceptualising and understanding points of difference already constitute a major step in the right direction. As conscious participants, Christians are well advised not to misjudge the particularity of their own position as something that is necessarily surpassed by the truth claim of Christianity, nor as something that discredits this truth claim in advance, but rather as irreducibly constitutive of the truth of the Christian faith. Neither the inclination to universalise the truth claim (exclusivism and inclusivism) nor its pluralistic negation (pluralism) are of much use in this respect. In considering the question of religious truth from a theological perspective, one cannot deny the epistemological consequences of the incarnation in Jesus Christ: it is in this concrete human being that God is revealed definitively, not without, but thanks to this status of being a human being. The consciousness of this dynamic leads to a radical theological hermeneutics which takes

²⁵ See my contribution to this subproject: L. Boeve, “Religious Truth, Particularity and Incarnation: A Theological Proposal for a Philosophical Hermeneutics of Religion,” in *Religion Challenged by Contingency* (eds. D.M. Grube and P. Jonkers; STAR 12; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 179–201.

into account this historical-contingent particularity: although God as such never coincides with this particularity, God can no longer be thought of without this particular history.

On the other hand: the incarnation of the truth is also the truth of the incarnation. It is here that a theological concept of religious truth may contribute to the turn to religion in contemporary continental philosophy. The linguistic character of religious truth, then, does not constitute a fall or a contamination. It does not render religious truth impossible or lead philosophical hermeneutics of religious particularity into the direction of an untenable “moment of pure religion”. On the contrary, a hermeneutics of religion does not lead beyond language but to language itself: to the contingent histories, practices, texts, and to concrete traditions and their interpretations. It is there that religious believers discover the reason and content of their religious truth claims, and it is thanks to the consciousness of this particularity, that they, as participants, can introduce these claims in ongoing interreligious conversations.